



“Music and Spirituality as a Means of Supporting the Academic Development of Students in the New Education Policy”

DR.SUNITA SHARMA

ASST. PROFESSOR MUSIC VOCAL

GOVT. DEGREE COLLEGE DHARAMPUR, SOLAN, HP

Abstract

The recent shift in Indian education via the National Education Policy 2020 (NEP 2020) emphasizes holistic, multidisciplinary, and well-rounded student development, going beyond purely cognitive outcomes. Within this paradigm, integrating domains such as music and spirituality into education may provide unique opportunities to support academic growth, student well-being, and character formation. This study explores how music—both as listening, participation (singing/instrument), and music education—and spirituality—defined broadly as students’ sense of meaning, connection, values, gratitude and inner life—can act as supports (aids) in academic development of students. Drawing on recent empirical literature in music education, cognitive psychology, and spirituality research, this paper presents a conceptual framework linking music and spirituality to student academic outcomes, cognitive functioning (focus, memory, concentration), affective dimensions (motivation, resilience, well-being) and moral/character development. The literature reveals that music education (and listening) can enhance attention, memory retention and cognitive skills, and that spirituality correlates positively with academic performance, happiness and well-being. The paper then situates these findings within the Indian school context under NEP 2020, arguing that embedding music-and-spirituality programmes can align with the policy’s vision of “education for life”, socio-emotional competencies and multidisciplinary learning. It offers practical suggestions for integrating musical and spiritual practices in school curricula, teacher training, and extracurricular programmes. Limitations are discussed, including mixed findings in music–performance links and cultural/contextual variability, and the need for rigorous longitudinal and intervention research in the Indian context is noted. In conclusion, this study posits that music and spirituality—far from being peripheral—can serve as meaningful aids to academic development, especially within a policy environment valuing holistic education.

Keywords:-NEP 2020, Holistic Education, Music Education, Spirituality, Academic Development, Cognitive Functioning, Socio-Emotional Learning, Character Formation.

Introduction:

The Indian education system is undergoing a significant transformation with the National Education Policy 2020 (NEP 2020). The policy emphasises not only content and examination performance, but broader student development including cognitive, affective, and psychomotor domains; critical thinking; creativity; health and well-being; moral and civic capacities; and lifelong learning. Under this paradigm, non-traditional domains such as the arts (including music) and spirituality (understood as students' inner life, values, and meaning-making) are gaining renewed importance.

Music and spirituality, while distinct domains, share significant overlaps: music is often used in spiritual or contemplative contexts (rituals, singing, meditation), and spirituality frequently draws on aesthetic, musical, and bodily practices for meaning, transcendence and well-being. Yet despite this interrelation, the role of music and spirituality in academic development has received relatively little systematic attention in mainstream education research—particularly in the Indian context. This paper seeks to address this gap by exploring how music and spirituality can act as aids in academic development of students, aligning with the holistic aims of NEP 2020.

The key questions include:

- i. What is the evidence that music (listening/participation) influences cognitive, affective, academic outcomes in students?
- ii. What is the evidence that spirituality influences academic outcomes?
- iii. How can these two domains be integrated into school curricula and practice under NEP 2020 to support academic development?
- iv. What are practical recommendations, limitations and future research directions for the Indian school context?

In approaching these questions, this paper conducts a literature review across scholarship in music education, cognitive psychology, spirituality and academic performance; develops a conceptual framework; and offers recommendations for policy and practice. While the central focus is academic development (e.g., attainment, concentration, memory, motivation, self-regulation), the discussion also recognizes broader benefits of well-being, character and life-skills, in line with NEP 2020's holistic vision.

Music, cognitive functioning and academic performance:

There is substantial research documenting the role of music (both active participation in music education and passive listening) on cognitive processes relevant to learning, such as attention, memory, executive control, and concentration. For example, a recent study of college students in Indonesia found that listening to music while studying helped 83.3% of respondents feel calmer and more concentrated. Another study explored the relationship between listening to music and academic productivity among International Baccalaureate students and found no significant correlation—but raised important questions on genre and individual differences. A newer study at Cairo University (2024) found evidence of a relationship between music listening habits, concentration and academic performance among undergraduate students. In the domain of music education and spirituality, van der Merwe & Habron (2015) developed a conceptual model of “spirituality in music education” which employed lifeworld dimensions to argue that music education can open spaces of relationality, temporality, corporeality and meaning-making which are essential for deep learning. The international society for music education (International Society for Music Education) even has a “Spirituality & Music Education” interest group recognizing the intersection of music education and spirituality.

Some empirical studies specifically link music education with academic outcomes: e.g., students engaged in instrumental music were shown to be ahead in math, English and science skills (though confounding variables exist). While this study has limitations, it suggests potential academic benefit from music participation.

Thus, for academic development, music may support:

- Improved concentration/attention and lower distractibility.
- Better memory retention and recall (via mental encoding/association).
- Enhanced executive functions (planning, organisation, sustained focus).
- Increased motivation, engagement, and thus better time-on-task.
- Emotional regulation (stress reduction) which allows better learning environment.

Spirituality and academic performance:

“Spirituality” is somewhat contested as a concept, but in educational research it is often defined as students’ sense of meaning/purpose, values, connectedness (with self, others, nature or transcendent), inner life, gratitude, forgiveness and ethical orientation. Research increasingly shows that such dimensions positively correlate with well-being and academic outcomes. For instance, a study among Indian university students found that spirituality moderates the relationship between forgiveness/self-forgiveness, gratitude and academic performance via happiness. Another Indian study found a moderate positive correlation ($r=.302$) between spirituality and academic performance among young adults in Delhi NCR. Further, a 2007 review found that students who attributed higher spirituality tended to attribute their academic success to it.

In the specific domain of music, a study of adult learners of Japanese shakuhachi music found that spirituality plays a role in the learning process—not just via technical skill but via self-cultivation and inner meaning. Similarly, conceptual work shows that music education with a spiritual orientation can foster pedagogy that attends to whole-person development, not merely technique.

Thus, spirituality may contribute to academic development through:

- Enhanced motivation and purpose for learning (students perceive their learning as meaningful).
- Better resilience, emotional regulation and handling of academic stress.
- Ethical/character growth (responsibility, self-discipline, time-management).
- Improved well-being (happiness, life satisfaction) which supports better learning.

Integrating Music & Spirituality: Synergistic possibilities:

While music and spirituality individually have research bases, their intersection offers interesting possibilities. A thematic study of five individuals using music to enrich their souls found common themes of growth, healing, connection and spiritual well-being emerging via musical activity. Conceptual reviews (e.g., Jana 2023) explore how music and spirituality intersect in ritual, community, identity, emotion and transcendence.

In education, integrating music and spirituality might look like: music as contemplative practice (chanting, singing, mindful listening), use of sacred or meaning-laden songs, group singing/ensembles fostering community, and reflection/discussion on music’s meaning or values. These practices might deepen student

engagement, build community, enhance inner awareness, and thereby indirectly support academic development.

NEP 2020 and relevance for India:

NEP 2020 highlights arts and music as integral to the curriculum, emphasising that students should have opportunities for “experiential learning, art education, physical education, and vocational education”. Further, the policy underscores a “multidisciplinary, holistic, and integrated model” of education, recognizing the importance of socio-emotional learning, values education, and life skills. The inclusion of music and spiritual/values-orientation thus fits neatly into the policy’s vision. Schools under NEP are encouraged to provide space for arts (including music), and to foster students’ creativity, ethical capacities, and well-being. Hence exploring how music + spirituality can aid academic development is timely and contextually relevant.

Conceptual Framework & Proposed Model:

Based on the literature above, the following conceptual framework is proposed for how music and spirituality can act as aids in academic development of students (see Figure 1).

Figure 1: Conceptual Model Linking Music and Spirituality to Academic Development within the NEP 2020 holistic education framework.

1.	Music Engagement	Listening & Participation	1. Enhances cognitive functioning (attention, memory, executive control) 2. Leads to improved academic skills and learning outcomes (comprehension, retention, performance).
2.	Music Participation	Singing/Instrumental/Group Music Activities	1. Promotes emotional regulation and stress reduction. 2. Creates a more positive and conducive learning environment.
3.	Spirituality	sense of meaning, values, gratitude, connectedness	1. Strengthens motivation, resilience, self-regulation, and well-being 2. Positively influences academic outcomes.
4.	Music with a Spiritual Dimension	choir singing with reflection, devotional/meditative music, value-based musical activities	1. Fosters community building, moral and character development, and inner life awareness. 2. Indirectly supports the academic environment through improved student dispositions (self-discipline, empathy, perseverance).
5.	Curriculum & Policy Context (NEP 2020)	Structural enablers such as school programmes, teacher training, and institutional culture act as mediators that influence the effectiveness of integrating music and spirituality into education.	

Key assumptions:

- The effects are indirect: music or spirituality does not automatically guarantee higher grades, but they provide supportive conditions (cognitive, affective, and motivational) that enhance students' ability to learn.
- Context matters: student age, cultural background, type of music, spirituality definitions, school environment all moderates the effect.
- Integration must be intentional: simply offering music lessons may not yield academic impact unless they are connected meaningfully to student development, values, well being.
- Holistic development is aligned with NEP 2020: academic development includes not just marks but learning disposition, critical thinking, socio-emotional skills.

Implications for Practice in the NEP 2020:

Given the above, how might Indian schools (and by extension other similar educational systems) integrate music and spirituality to aid academic development?

Curriculum and extracurricular programme design:

- i. Schools can design regular music classes (instrumental, vocal) and encourage student participation in ensembles, choir, band, or group singing. This strengthens cognitive skills (attention, memory) and fosters engagement.
- ii. Incorporate contemplative musical practices: e.g., singing, chanting, mindful listening sessions, or reflections after musical experience. These practices link music and spirituality and support emotional regulation and meaning-making.
- iii. Values/character education programmes can incorporate musical activities that are spiritually oriented (not necessarily religious)–for example, songs reflecting gratitude, connectedness, respect, and self-discipline.
- iv. Create platforms for students to reflect on music, meaning and inner life: e.g., after choir, a short reflection session on what the music meant how it made them feel connected or changed something.
- v. Provide inter-disciplinary linkages: music lessons linked with other subjects (language, history, social science) and values education.

Teacher training and professional development:

- ❖ Teachers (both music specialists and generalist educators) should receive training on how to integrate music and spirituality into their pedagogy-not just specialist music instruction. The conceptual literature (van der Merwe & Habron) emphasizes awareness of lifeworld dimensions of students' experience.
- ❖ Professional development may cover topics such as: mindful listening, group singing, reflective practice, relational and emotional dimensions of music education, linking music to student well-being and meaning.
- ❖ Encourage collaboration between music faculty, counsellors, and academic teachers to embed music/spiritual programmes within the broader academic and socio-emotional curriculum.

Monitoring and evaluation:

- Schools should monitor not only grades but also student engagement, attendance, socio-emotional outcomes, concentration/focus, motivation, and self-regulation when implementing music-spiritual integration.
- Conduct pilot studies: for example, measure whether students participating in choir or contemplative music sessions show improved concentration, fewer disciplinary issues, and better

academic attitudes. Given the mixed findings in some literature (e.g., the Indiana-based study found no significant relationship between music listening and academic productivity) pilot evaluation is crucial.

- Reflect on cultural/contextual adaptation: India's cultural diversity means music/spiritual programmes must be contextually sensitive (local languages, traditions, inclusive of diverse faiths/backgrounds).

Alignment with NEP 2020's vision:

- The NEP's emphasis on holistic education, multidisciplinary, social-emotional learning, and art education provides the policy space for music + spirituality integration.
- Schools could adopt a "Gaon, Shiksha and Sanskriti" model for rural areas where local musical traditions are harnessed in student learning.
- Spirituality—in the sense of values, life purpose, and reflection—is parallel to NEP's notion of life-skills, character development and responsible citizenship.

Limitations, Challenges and Future Research:

Limitations and caution:

- While many studies show positive associations, causality is less clear. For instance, the 2023 PH study on classical music and academic performance found no significant relationship
- The term "spirituality" is broad and variously defined; measurement varies across studies. The cultural interpretation of spirituality matters significantly (Indian vs Western conceptions).
- Music interventions differ widely (listening vs instrument vs choir vs genre vs duration). The heterogeneity makes generalization difficult.
- Many studies focus on short-term outcomes; longitudinal data is sparse.
- The Indian schooling context has resource constraints (time, teacher expertise, curriculum load) which may hamper implementation.

Challenges in Indian context:

- Overloaded curricula: Finding time for regular musical/spiritual sessions may be difficult in exam-driven school systems.
- Teacher availability and training: Many schools lack full-time music teachers; integrating spirituality may require additional expertise.
- Cultural and religious diversity: Spiritual music programmes must be inclusive and non-sectarian to avoid alienating students or violating secular norms.
- Assessment pressures: Schools and students prioritise marks; the value of music/spirituality may be under-appreciated unless clearly linked to academic outcomes.

Directions for future research:

- Rigorous intervention studies in the Indian context: e.g., randomly assigned choir/ mindful music programme in Grade 9 and measuring academic, concentration, attendance, well-being outcomes.
- Longitudinal tracking: Follow students across years to see whether involvement in music/spiritual programmes tallies with academic trajectories, retention and well-being.
- Disaggregation by student demographics: Explore whether benefits differ by gender, socio-economic status, region, rural/urban, first-generation learners.

- Qualitative studies exploring student and teacher lived experiences of music/spiritual activities and perceived academic impact.
- Cost-effectiveness/feasibility studies: For schools with limited resources, what models of music/spiritual integration are sustainable and scalable?

Discussion:

Integrating music and spirituality as supports for academic development aligns well with contemporary neuroscience, educational psychology and holistic pedagogical approaches. For example, students facing high academic stress may benefit from group singing/choir sessions that aid emotional regulation, create a sense of community and enhance focus for study. Meanwhile, spirituality (in the broad sense) may empower students with greater purpose, resilience, gratitude and self-discipline-factors that support deeper learning rather than superficial exam cramming. In the Indian context, where NEP 2020 invites schools to transcend rote-learning and exam-centric models, introducing musical-spiritual programmes offers a pathway to enrich student development.

However, as the literature shows, mere exposure to music or invoking spirituality does not guarantee academic improvements; rather the design, context, student engagement, cultural relevance and integration matter. The proposed conceptual framework emphasises mediation: cognitive functioning, motivation/self-regulation, well-being and character dispositions are the pathways through which music/spirituality influence academic development.

When applied to Indian schools, practical considerations include: aligning with existing arts/music curriculum buckets; offering optional but encouraged music/spiritual-integration programmes; using local musical traditions for cultural relevance; ensuring teacher preparation; monitoring across multiple outcomes (academic, well-being, motivation). Schools may begin with small pilots (e.g., weekly choir, music-listening and reflection sessions, and contemplative singing before exams) and evaluate outcomes. Over time, such programmes can become part of the school culture and contribute to the holistic vision of NEP 2020.

Conclusion:

The shift in Indian education via NEP 2020 provides a timely opportunity to rethink student development beyond academic scores. This paper has argued that music and spirituality-often regarded as peripheral to mainstream schooling-can function as meaningful aids to students' academic development. Evidence from cognitive psychology and educational research shows that music can support attention, memory, emotional regulation, and motivation; likewise, spirituality supports meaning, motivation, resilience, self-regulation, and well-being-all of which underpin academic learning. By designing intentional programs that integrate musical participation, contemplative/reflection practices, and spiritual/values-oriented learning, schools can align with NEP 2020's holistic goals and support students in becoming well-rounded learners. While acknowledging the limitations and the need for rigorous research, this work encourages policymakers, curriculum designers, teacher educators, and school leaders to embrace the interplay of music and spirituality in education. In doing so, we may foster learning environments where students not only achieve academically but also develop inner resources, resilience, purpose, and joy in learning.

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